

Putin's Glorified Version of Russian Nationality

By [Stephen Blank](#)

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It seems more apparent that Russia's war against Ukraine also aims to impose a new ideological-political order in Russia if not the entire Commonwealth of Independent States. At home, this war has featured a massive, unrelenting propaganda offensive depicting Ukraine as a Hobbesian nightmare of civil anarchy and Russia as a unique Christian civilization under siege from the secularizing and nihilistic West. Russia explains the siege against it in geopolitical terms — as an effort to prevent the country from becoming a great power again. Russia also presents the attack in ideological terms— as an attempt to foist an alien and corrupt Western civilization and culture upon it.

In Putin's glossy narrative,
there's no room for Stalin's
gulags, corruption
and lawlessness.

But this new order represents not an advance but a regression in modern history, namely the recurring effort to impose an ideological-political order known as official nationality. This order takes its name from the first such attempt in 1849 by Count Sergei Uvarov, Tsar Nicholas I's education minister. It entails an officially imposed glorification of three distinct principles: autocracy, Russian Orthodoxy and nationality. Even then, it was an attempt to resist the specter of revolution expressed in Europe's revolutions of 1848.

But the recurring effort to impose this order under Tsars Alexander III and Nicholas II — and later in Leninist forms under Stalin in the late 1940s until 1953 and to a certain extent under Brezhnev — has more profound manifestations and implications. The cults of the ruler, his state and a uniquely ethnic nationalist ideology, be it Orthodox Christianity or Marxism-Leninism, emerged in all four cases as signs that the regime had absolutely nothing to offer at home other than more of the same. The status quo was immutable. Rather than offer people much-needed reforms, the regime instead offered itself as well as people a confused mixtures of ideologies, generally lifted from German conservatism or Marxism tricked out in nationalist-religious rhetoric to substitute for necessary reforms.

Alongside this strident but insubstantial pageant of cultural narcissism in all four cases, we also see a cult of the police. Stalin and Brezhnev all believed that only the police could save the country from the dangers of revolutionaries, Westerners, Zionists and others seeking to destroy the system. Putin is continuing this tradition.

In addition, there was a state-sponsored glorification of Russian nationality and culture as a somehow spiritually superior and unique formation. Obviously in this system, there is no room to discuss Stalin's gulags, rampant corruption, lawlessness and other phenomena that are the congenital offspring of unlimited autocracy and hardly characteristic of an advanced civilization. Today, as before, the regime has imposed an officially sanctioned and sanitized version of Russian history designed to suppress critical inquiry and speech about the true nature of the system. The habitual mendacity of the Russian state thus received even greater state sanction, ultimately deluding even the tsars and their communist or post-communist successors in their threat assessments and delusional notions of Russia's real condition.

With that in mind, it is hardly surprising that in all four cases the regime, fortified by a belief in its rectitude and yet feeling itself under siege and victimized abroad, blundered into wars that Russia could not sustain. In the Crimean War, the Russo-Japanese War and Afghanistan, the regime fully failed to recognize the nature of the war or the strategic situation in which it was acting and thus suffered serious defeats. But in all four cases, either the tsar who launched these misbegotten wars wound up dead or his political system in tatters, just as in 1905. Therefore, it is quite likely that Putin, who is clearly today's tsar and clearly sees himself as a man marked by history to save Russia, has instead accelerated both the forces of stagnation and of imperial overstretch and ethnic nationalism that will make it impossible for his successor to govern as he did — if he can govern at all.

Putin has shown that the system has nothing to offer apart from dangerous imperial circuses. He has also made it clear that nobody from his team can succeed him in 2018. By annexing Crimea, both Putin and Russia as a whole have trapped themselves, they cannot return this poisoned chalice unless the regime comes under a hailstorm of domestic criticism. Neither can anyone succeed Putin because he has become an untouchable figure. Only he can

guarantee that the current system will continue.

Putin, by restoring a neo-tsarist ethos, may have won popularity for now, but he has done so by consigning Russia to a future of stagnation, militarization, repression and the rhetoric if not the reality of imperial predation upon Russia's neighbors, not to mention lasting isolation and suspicion abroad.

A Hegelian philosopher might smile at this cunning manipulation of history by which Putin's efforts to reassert the imperial grandeur and ethos of tsarist Russia inevitably bring it closer to dependence upon an even more venerable empire. But if Russian history is any guide, the ultimate outcome of this adventure is likely to be another collapse of state power. Russia already cannot sustain the burdens foisted upon it by Putin and his fellow siloviki.

Having emerged out of the cauldron of the Chechen wars, Putin's system will probably not surrender meekly to its challengers as the Soviet order did. During the Soviet period, the armed forces and KGB attempted a coup. If a modern revolution is to be averted, Putin's successor will have no choice but to institute even greater reforms than those currently needed. Putin may have won Crimea for now, and even perhaps still more of Ukraine, but he has done so by mortgaging Russia's future to more wars.

Marx noted that when history repeats itself the first time it is tragedy, and the second time it is farce. But what happens when the same historical sequence reappears a third or fourth time?

Stephen Blank is a senior fellow at the American Foreign Policy Council.

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